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It is unlikely that the current Huleh incident involving armed clashes between Israel and Syria will develop into major hostilities between the two countries, although further isolated clashes along the border will probably occur before the tense situation is brought under control. The incident does, however, re-emphasize the fact that almost no progress has been made in improving Israeli-Arab relations in the two years since Israel concluded armistice agreements with its four Arab neighbors. Under the inexorable pressure of a rapidly expanding population, Israel continues to adopt policies which, however progressive and worthy in themselves, have the effect of dispossessing large groups of local Arabs. The latter inevitably turn for protection to the neighboring Arab governments which, because of the pressures of anti-Zionism, are compelled to come to their aid.

The Huleh incident is not unique; similar clashes have occurred repeatedly during the past two years, particularly in the Jerusalem, Hebron, and Gaza areas. It is of particular interest, however, not only because it is more serious than the others but because it epitomizes the entire Palestine problem. The fundamental issues in this incident, as well as the tactics employed by Israelis and Arabs, are almost identical to the issues and tactics of the Palestine War in 1948. Furthermore, the Security Council, to which the issue has already been referred by both Israel and Syria, and the UN-directed Mixed Armistice Commission (MAC) in the area are once again confronted with the thankless task of, in theory, mediating the issue and, in practice, persuading Syria to accept as gracefully as possible what in any event Israel is determined to carry out -- in this case, the reclamation project in the demilitarized zone south of Lake Huleh.

The present incident had its origin about two months ago when Israel started work on a reclamation scheme in the area south of Lake Huleh near the Syrian border. Although the area affected is in Israeli territory, it is inhabited by Arabs. Furthermore, as it is a demilitarized

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zone under the Israeli-Syrian Armistice and its ultimate disposition is theoretically still in doubt, no unusual activity is permitted therein except by agreement between the two countries. The reclamation work was, therefore, strongly opposed not only by the local Arabs, whose land it immediately affected, but also by the Syrians, who asserted that Israel was violating the Armistice agreement.

About a month ago local Arabs began sporadically to shoot from the Syrian side of the border at the Israeli reclamation workers in the Huleh area. The Israelis soon returned the fire with both rifles and mortars and continued their work. In spite of the local tension, the two governments appeared to be showing considerable restraint and it was generally expected that the MAC would be able to bring the situation under control. However, Israel refused to accede to the MAC request that it temporarily suspend work on the drainage scheme, and shortly thereafter the situation was exacerbated by Israel's action in rounding up all the local Arabs and removing them from the area.

At this stage in developments, Syria was, at least morally, in a strong position. Israel had not only violated the Armistice agreement but had also defied a specific injunction of the MAC. However, Syria undermined its own position by permitting Syrian Arabs to occupy the Arab village of El Hamma within the Israeli demilitarized zone. A group of Israelis armed with automatic weapons subsequently tried to occupy El Hamma and fired on both the Arabs in the village and Syrian troops at a nearby border post within Syrian territory. The Syrian troops eventually returned the fire, killed seven Israelis, wounded another, and captured one. The following day, eight Israeli aircraft bombed and strafed El Hamma and police and army posts in Syrian territory. Israeli forces also completely destroyed two other Arab villages in the Israeli demilitarized zone; the Arab inhabitants of the villages had in the meantime fled to Syrian territory.

Israeli, Syrian, and even Jordan forces have been concentrated in the area, and Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan have indicated they will support Syria against further Israeli aggression. It is unlikely, however, that Israel will be willing at this time to re-embark on full-scale war with its neighbors. The most probable development is that Israel will agree temporarily to suspend its reclamation work and that an attempt will be made to mediate the issue in the MAC. However, unless Syria can be persuaded to acquiesce in Israel's reclamation plans, future hostilities are inevitable, for Israel will certainly refuse to abandon them. If a compromise is reached, it will probably be on the basis of adequate compensation to the local Arabs whose interests in the issue are the ones most directly affected.

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